

SEATTLE FIRE DEPARTMENT
Information Bulletin #963



High Rise Building Fire Drills

Fire Drill Requirements

Fire drills are required a minimum of once every 120 days in high rise buildings, as specified in Section 19309.3 of the Seattle Fire Code. The drills should be conducted in accordance with procedures set forth in the building's Emergency Operations Plan (for information on Emergency Operations Plans, see SFD Info. Bulletin #2001-1). All building staff should participate in drills held by building management. Occupants should also participate. Even though some occupants, such as apartment residents, are not required to participate they should be encouraged to do so.

A log book should be kept to document compliance with the drill requirement. The log should indicate the date, time and section of the building in which the drill was conducted. Immediately prior to the drill, the building's central station monitoring company should be notified. This will prevent a Fire Department response to the building. When the drill is completed, the monitoring company should be notified that the building is returned to normal operations.

Conducting a Drill

In a fire drill, building occupants should duplicate as closely as possible the actions they would take if a fire occurred. Total evacuation of a high rise building is not practical, and could even be dangerous. Drills involving selected portions of the building more accurately simulates fire emergency conditions. During a drill, tenants should be encouraged to follow the established fire emergency procedures. Keep in mind that during an

emergency, people tend to perform those behaviors that they have practiced. Minimum participation would be to have building occupants go into the exit stairwell, although it is advisable to have them go to their actual staging area, if possible. Those evacuating to the outside of the building should report to the established assembly area away from the building.

Announced Vs. Unannounced

Fire drills may be preannounced to building staff or occupants, or they may be unannounced. Consideration of the building occupants and the use of the building may determine which type of drill is most appropriate. For example, in a residential building primarily occupied by older adults, or a mixed use facility where doctor's offices may be located, it's probably best to notify occupants of the date and time of the drill. It may be appropriate to conduct an unannounced drill for only certain portions of the building.

Procedures for Building Staff

In a drill, building staff and floor wardens should follow procedures set forth in the building's Emergency Operations Plan. This is an excellent way to find out if the plan works smoothly and produces the desired results.

Critique your drill

Check for the following:

- Building occupants could clearly hear and understand the alarm and any additional instructions.
- Evacuation was completed in an orderly and expedient manner.

- Floor wardens guided occupants to safety, completed floor check and reported to building staff or Fire Safety Director upon completion of evacuation.
- Disabled persons were assisted.
- Elevators were not used for evacuation.

Establishing a Fire Scenario

While evacuation of a high rise building may be completed in a matter of minutes in a fire drill, the situation is often quite different under actual conditions. Evacuation may be slowed by poor visibility from smoke, lighting failure, or because one or more of the exit stairwells is blocked by smoke or fire.

To prepare building occupants for more realistic conditions, you may choose to designate a specific location for the “fire” and establish a scenario which would alter the basic fire drill procedures. It is best to attempt this type of drill after occupants have become familiar with their standard evacuation procedures. This type of drill may be more interesting to building occupants, as they have to make decisions when they encounter situations apart from the ordinary.

Ideas for creating a fire scenario:

- Post signs or locate building staff inside one of the exit stairwells to inform those attempting to enter that the stairwell is blocked by smoke or flame and they must choose a different route.
- Designate individuals to wear signs indicating impaired sight, hearing or mobility which may require assistance from building occupants in an emergency. In hotel occupancies, persons may be designated as non-English speaking and may require special instructions.
- Use a cardboard box decorated with red paper flames, or a flashing light, to indicate where the “fire” is located.

Apathy or Lack of Participation

There are some building occupants who continually refuse to participate in fire drills.

Problems with frequent false or nuisance alarms in a building may make matters even worse. In most instances, the Fire Department cannot issue citations for failure to participate in a drill. Some ideas to increase participation may be provided by contacting the Public Education Section of the Fire Prevention Division at 206-386-1337.

The Fire Safety Director’s best tactic in gaining cooperation in drills is to try to explain the advantages of participation. Explaining that under real fire conditions evacuation can be considerably more complicated is one method. Informing employers that liability for their employees may increase if they do not allow or encourage participation in the drill may be influential. If a fire did occur and one of their employees was injured or killed, it is possible they may be named in some legal action because of their lack of support for learning fire safety procedures.

Making the drill more interesting by using a fire scenario, or checking to make sure the drill will be held at a convenient time, may yield better participation. Creative tactics can be tried. One employer in Seattle tries to make the drill a positive activity for those participating by having floor wardens hand out candy to occupants as they reach their assembly area. The occupants find the candy a pleasant surprise and it gives them something to talk about besides any inconvenience resulting from the interruption caused by the drill.

Fire Drills Pay Off

Fire drills can make the difference in helping occupants of a building know what to do when a fire occurs. In spite of the investment incurred in installing alarm systems and other fire protection features, if people do not act or know what to do when the alarm rings, the protection features alone may not keep them safe. Fire drills are the best indicator that during a fire emergency, evacuation will go smoothly and successfully.